

## LESSON 4: ALCOHOL — USE AND EFFECT



*depressant  
distilled  
ethyl alcohol  
ferment  
gateway  
intoxicated*

### INTRODUCTION

Many people hold the view that experimentation with or use of alcohol is considered normal or acceptable behavior. However, the use of alcohol often progresses to further drug abuses. Accordingly, some experts attach the term “**gateway**” to this substance. Use of drugs such as cocaine and heroin is unusual in those who have not previously used alcohol.

Alcohol abuse can cause serious chemical dependencies, harmful physical and psychological effects, and much suffering by family and friends. As awareness of these ill effects reaches new heights, more and more Americans are joining forces to fight alcohol abuse everyday.

#### DID YOU KNOW?

Alcohol is legal only to those of legal drinking age, and legal drinking ages differ in and are regulated by the individual states.

## ALCOHOL

### USE

Alcohol is a natural substance formed when sugar and yeast react and **ferment**. It is a drug — a **depressant** that is absorbed into the bloodstream and transmitted to virtually all parts of the body.

There are many different kinds of alcohol, but the kind found in wine, beer, and **distilled** spirits is called **ethyl alcohol**. A bottle of beer, a glass of wine, and a shot of hard liquor all have approximately the same amount of pure alcohol — a little more than one-half ounce.

Youths are particularly susceptible to the side-effects of alcohol. There is no such thing as a totally “safe” use of any mind-altering drug by young adults. Alcohol is more harmful to youths than adults for a variety of reasons. Since their bodies are still developing and changing both physically and chemically, alcohol causes more physical and emotional damage to teenagers than adults. A teenager’s use of alcohol greatly increases his or her chances of becoming an alcoholic later in life.

#### DID YOU KNOW?

- Ninety percent of teenage automobile accidents involve alcohol.
- Drinking and driving accidents are the leading cause of death among 15-24 year olds.
- Seventy percent of teenage suicide attempts involve alcohol.

## EFFECTS

The effects of ethyl alcohol on the human body can range greatly depending on:

- Size of the individual
- How empty the stomach is at the time of alcohol consumption
- State of health and fatigue
- Mental attitude
- Speed and amount of consumption.

Although alcohol may make a person feel “high,” alcohol is actually considered a “downer” drug. It slows down or depresses the central nervous system causing slowed reactions, slurred speech, impaired coordination and judgment, and sometimes unconsciousness. Because alcohol affects reaction time, coordination, and judgment, people under its influence are more accident prone and less likely to make wise decisions. For these reasons, drinking and driving are a very dangerous combination — and illegal.

Long-term effects of alcohol abuse include alcoholism; cancers of the liver, stomach, colon, larynx, esophagus, and breast; high blood pressure; heart attacks; strokes; stomach ulcers; birth defects; premature aging; and a diminished immunity to disease due to non-function of infection-fighting cells. In men, hormone levels change causing lower sex drives and enlarged breasts, while women’s menstrual cycles become irregular, possibly resulting in infertility.

The list goes on to include shrinking of the muscles, including the heart; kidney, bladder, and pancreas damage; brain damage affecting vision and memory; depression; and

mental illness. Obviously, long-term damage from alcohol abuse can be irreversible and result in death.

Less obvious than these physical effects, but just as tell-tale, are the warning signs that indicate alcohol consumption is too high. Ask yourself the following questions when looking for signs of a problem with alcohol in friends or family members:

- Does the person pour a drink as an immediate reaction when faced with problems?
- Has the person become argumentative and moody?
- Does the person drink until **intoxicated**?
- Does the person miss school, work, or other activities because of drinking?
- Does the person attempt to handle social celebrations and stress with alcohol?
- Does the person get angry when confronted about alcohol abuse?
- Does the person ever drive a car after drinking?



If you answer “yes” to any of these questions, see a counselor or someone who is

trained to provide treatment and support. Show you care by learning the best way to help your friend or family member.

While the above questions can alert you to possible problems with alcohol, it is important to remember that any use of alcohol by young adults is considered abuse and cause for concern.

### **FIRST AID TREATMENT FOR EXCESSIVE ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION**

If the situation permits, before doing anything else, call poison control or the nearest emergency room and tell them what the person has taken, describe his or her symptoms, and seek advice on what action to take. In general, follow these rules:

- If the victim is conscious and took the overdose in the last thirty minutes, make him or her vomit.
- Keep the victim awake and conscious.
- Protect overly active, aggressive, or panic-stricken victims from hurting themselves, you, or others.
- Place an unconscious victim on his or her side, so that if the victim vomits, he or she will not choke or drown in it. This position also allows good respiration.
- Monitor the victim's breathing.
- Maintain the victim's body temperature.
- Reassure the victim that he or she will be okay.
- If the victim is having convulsions, do not put anything in his or her mouth. Clear

away furniture and sharp objects, and move the victim only if he or she is near a fire, glass door, stairway, or other danger.

- Keep any evidence, including any material vomited, to help medical personnel determine what and how much the person took.

Call for Emergency Medical Services or transport the victim to a hospital or doctor.

### *PREVENTION*

If someone you know has a problem with alcohol, try to be understanding and supportive. Listen to the reasons for the use, and assist the user in finding help. Educate the user on the harmful effects of alcohol, and explain why counseling and/or treatment is important.

Many local and national organizations offer information and help on alcohol abuse, and almost every telephone book in the nation lists telephone numbers for these programs.

- Alateen is a self-help organization for teenagers whose lives have been affected by someone else's drinking.
- Al-Anon is a self-help organization for non-alcoholic adults whose lives have been affected by someone else's drinking.
- Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is a treatment program that offers health services to all who need them regardless of age or income.
- The National Council on Alcoholism provides information, referrals, and counseling to problem drinkers and their families.

Even if no one close to you has a problem with alcohol, work to maintain a positive self-image and promote drug-free living. Join an anti-drug club or start one — there are many nationwide. You may choose to become involved with *Students Against Driving Drunk* (S.A.D.D.) or initiate a *Safe Ride Home* program at your school and sell cards that people who have been drinking can use for free taxi rides.

***DON'T DRINK  
& DRIVE***



Help in the fight to keep your school drug-free. Organize a poster competition at your school in which students address the

need for education and responsibility in the consumption of alcohol. Develop positive peer pressure and teach the harmful effects of alcohol abuse. Remember that there is strength in numbers and that encouraging alcohol-free activities can prevent problems from ever starting.

## CONCLUSION

While the damaging effects of alcohol consumption use remain obvious, it has also become clear that even non-users of these substances can experience problems. More and more people are being affected every day. Because any use by young people is considered harmful and can have a dramatic effect on life and preparation for the future, challenge yourself and others to pledge not to use these dangerous substances.